

Welthy Fisher

By ANJUM NAIM

On a Mission for Literacy

The history of the literacy movement in India would be incomplete without taking into account Welthy Honsinger Fisher's contribution.

Through her determination and commitment she was able to make a difference in the lives of thousands of people.

Born in Rome, New York, in 1879, she graduated from Syracuse University in 1900. She started working as a teacher, but within six years she was sent to China, as a Methodist Church missionary. There she became principal of a girls' school in Nanchang.

But India called. In 1924, she married Fred Fisher, a Methodist bishop working in Agra. The Fishers were well-acquainted with prominent leaders of the Indian independence movement and their extensive travel convinced them that poverty and lack of education were the root causes of suffering.

In 1938, Fisher's husband died in Detroit, Michigan, but she decided to carry on her work. She returned to India in 1947 and once again met Mohandas K. Gandhi, who advised Fisher that if she wanted to spread education in India, she should work in the villages. He repeated



Courtesy Literacy House

this advice in his last meeting with her six weeks before he was assassinated.

Fisher, who was well-known as an educational activist, was asked in 1952 by Dr. Arthur T. Mosher, principal of the Allahabad Agricultural Institute, to visit Allahabad and train a few people selected by the government, who would in turn train village teachers.

In Allahabad, she started her training program with 40 people at a small bungalow of the Agricultural Institute. This was the first step toward what later became Literacy House, a small nonformal school that combined literacy with vocational training. Fisher divided her entire movement under four heads: functional

Above: Welthy Fisher. Below left: Trainees and staff at the prayer hall at Literacy House. Below right: Staff members and trainees work in the garden at Literacy House.





Welthy Fisher chats with a gardener outside the prayer hall at Literacy House in 1958.

literacy, family life, food production and fear removal.

In early 1954, after just a year of operations, it became increasingly difficult to continue the program because of financial constraints. But Fisher decided to take up the challenge. She rented an old garage near the Allahabad Agricultural Institute and started giving classes on the verandah. She went to America and explained her plan to the trustees of World Literacy Inc., which donated \$45,000 for her mission.

On her return to India, Fisher got a request from K.M. Munshi, the then governor of Uttar Pradesh, to shift her Literacy House to Lucknow. He provided a four-acre plot and the move was made in September 1956. Teacher training started at the new headquarters but

the educational mission was taken to the villages by workers who went into markets on bicycles with tin trunks full of booklets. These were lent out and collected after a couple of days. Greenwich Women of Connecticut, in America, donated a van, which helped literacy workers reach remote villages. Fisher would often accompany the caravan.

Meanwhile, necessary books were written and distributed on a large scale by Literacy House itself. A fortnightly newsletter, *Ujala* (Daylight), was launched and circulated through libraries and literacy kits. Workers were trained under the Functional Literacy Program so that they could, in turn, train others. A department of "Family Life Education" was established to enable rural women and girls to support themselves.

In 1958, when the Indian government wanted to spread the Panchayati Raj movement, Literacy House

was given the task of arranging orientation training for village heads and members of block development committees. Impressed by the activities, the government recognized it as a state resource center.

Fisher won the Ramon Magsaysay Award, given to honor outstanding individuals and organizations working in Asia for human development, in 1964 and donated the entire \$10,000 to buying two 16-hectare farms, so that classes in agriculture and animal husbandry could be offered, along with literacy.

Today, Literacy House is a major adult educational and teacher training institution. Its routine remains similar to what it was during Fisher's days. Trainee applicants sponsored by the government or others come to Literacy House from across India. They include teachers, deputy supervisors of schools, social workers, district welfare workers, home science instructors, cooperative workers, block development supervisors, health workers and clergymen.

After retiring from her work, Fisher spent most of her later years at her ancestral home in Southbury, Connecticut. She visited India for the last time in 1980 at the age of 101. She died a few months after returning home.

One of her co-workers, Mushtaq Pardesi, quotes her as often saying, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." Pardesi says, "She lit a lamp. And then the process of lighting the lamps, one after the other, never stopped."



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